

Democratic Decay Resource (DEM-DEC): Seventh Monthly Bibliography Update – February 2019

Tom Gerald Daly

2019-02-12T10:41:18

The DEM-DEC Bibliography

The [DEM-DEC Main Bibliography](#) (finalised on 24 June 2018) presents a global range of research on democratic decay. It has a strong focus on research by public lawyers – spanning constitutional, international and transnational law – but also includes key research from other disciplines, as well as policy texts. Updates to the Bibliography are issued on the first Monday of each month, based on new publications and suggestions from users of DEM-DEC. All updates should be read in conjunction with the main bibliography on DEM-DEC.

Seventh monthly update since DEM-DEC was launched

This seventh monthly update was issued on 6 February 2019 and is [now available on DEM-DEC](#). Sincere thanks to [new DEM-DEC Editor Kuan-Wei Chen](#), who assisted in production of this Update – the biggest yet! Welcome on board, Kuan-Wei.

Additions in the February Update include:

- New research worldwide from January 2019
- A significant list of additions suggested by DEM-DEC Users
- A growing list of forthcoming research and
- A list of resources recently added to the DEM-DEC [Links](#) section.

Identifying Themes

Each monthly Bibliography Update includes a section identifying themes from the update. The aim is simply to provide ‘added value’ by helping users to navigate the update, and to provide some limited commentary, especially on very recent research. Although it is impossible to capture every dimension of the issues covered in this Update, six key themes can be picked out.

1 Polarisation as a Key Threat to Democracy

A new special issue of the [ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science](#) (January 2019) is devoted to polarisation as a key threat to democracy. The issue, edited by Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, covers polarisation in a range of states, including long-established democracies (e.g. USA), younger democracies formerly considered to be consolidated (e.g. Poland, Hungary), unconsolidated democracies facing reversal or stalling of a long democratisation process (e.g. South

Africa, Philippines) or nascent process (e.g. Bangladesh), and finally, states that we might consider to be at the 'hard' authoritarianism end of the spectrum (e.g. Venezuela, Thailand, Zimbabwe). The editors' conclusions to this thought-provoking collection are highly insightful:

We find that the emergence of pernicious polarization (when a society is split into mutually distrustful "Us vs. Them" camps) is not attributable to any specific underlying social or political cleavage nor any particular institutional make-up. Instead, pernicious polarization arises when political entrepreneurs pursue their political objectives by using polarizing strategies, such as mobilizing voters with divisive, demonizing discourse and exploiting existing grievances, and opposing political elites then reciprocate with similarly polarizing tactics or fail to develop effective nonpolarizing responses.

2 The Authoritarian Elite

A notable theme from this month's update – and a reversal of last month's discussion of elite perceptions of the public and electorate (Theme 4, January Update) – is picked up by a number of pieces in this Update, characterising entrenched elites as themselves authoritarian in nature. A [recent book by Salvatore Babones \(October 2018\)](#), suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user, argues that when expert opinion becomes the sole point of view that is politically acceptable, it generates a new form of authoritarianism – the liberal authoritarianism of the expert class – and no longer contributes to the health of democracy. Many would agree, of course, that the excessive power of technocratic elites is not good for democratic governance. As I wrote in an [ICONnect Blog column](#) back in September 2017:

[I] is crucial to fully acknowledge that the current global crisis of democracy is not merely a bump in the road or short-lived aberration. Even in the best-case scenario that democracy turns out to be resilient in most states and we see a sharp public swing away from the false promises of illiberal populists, nativists, and neo-fascists, we cannot approach this as a 'course correction' or a 'return to normal'. There is no going back to the *status quo ante*. Repeat: there is no going back. Why does this bear repeating? Because there is a real danger that, if the worst of this global anti-democratic storm passes, we will just click back into our old habits, to business as usual, as though the crisis were nothing more than a bad dream.

...

Public lawyers ... bear a portion of responsibility for constructing the dominant narrative that vaunted legal and technical solutions to crucial governance and social questions while slowly allowing the messy, raucous voice of democracy to be stifled, contained, and circumvented, until it rebelled. We cannot go back to normal because our 'normal' was in so many ways an illusion. It was built, not on lies, but on profound misconceptions and no small degree of élitism and arrogance. The liberal consensus handed us greater power and influence, but we have been (or should have been) humbled by recent events and need to take this lesson in humility as a time to reflect, to re-think our assumptions. To learn the lessons of the recent past.

To renew our approach. To replace “we fear the people” with at least “we listen to the people”.

However, it is also all too easy to descend into caricatures, with the “elites” (often lumped together and treated as a single entity, despite clear differences between political, economic, and cultural elites) presented as venal and unresponsive, and the wider public as some repository of the ‘real’ truth or common wisdom. As Catherine Fieschi argues in a [forthcoming book on ‘Populocracy’](#) (June 2019), the notion of popular ‘authenticity’ is easily misused. She argues, in particular, that the new dynamics of social media – “the fantasy of radical transparency, the demand for immediacy, the rejection of expert truth and facts, and the imperative of continuous involvement”—have been channelled by authoritarian populist political forces to their electoral advantage by presenting themselves, too, as more authentic than the rest of the political class.

3 ‘Digital Unfreedom’

Resonating with Fieschi’s argument above, and discussions of the impact of technology on democratic governance in previous Updates (see Theme 5-August 2018, Theme 4-November 2018, Theme 5-January 2019), five items in this Update again address the negative impact not only of technology, but of those who control society-shaping platforms. A new book by [Shoshana Zuboff coins the term “surveillance capitalism”](#) to capture a new phase of economic history involving private companies and governments tracking individuals’ every action, with the goal of controlling and predicting behaviour, and rendering the individual a data commodity – slaves to digital technology rather than its masters, with serious repercussions for democracy and freedom. In the latest edition of the [Journal of Democracy \(January 2019\)](#), four pieces, by Larry Diamond, Ronald Deibert, Steven Feldstein and Xiao Qiang discuss ‘digital unfreedom’ in a variety of guises: the advent of ‘postmodern totalitarianism’; social media; the threats posed by artificial intelligence (AI); and the increasingly sophisticated use of technology as a tool of control in authoritarian societies. All five pieces raise serious questions, not only about the actors developing these technologies but also about the public’s complicity in their development. For instance, linking with Zuboff’s argument, Ronald Deibert offers three “painful truths”: (i) that social-media business is built on personal-data surveillance; (ii) that we have consented to this, albeit not entirely wittingly (in the sense that social media are designed to be addictive); and (iii) that the same algorithms underlying social media propel authoritarian practices that “aim to sow confusion, ignorance, prejudice, and chaos, thereby facilitating manipulation and undermining accountability.”

4 The New Social Classes: Neo-Aristocracy and Precariat

Picking up yet again on the themes of polarisation and the place of elites (including the rise and entrenchment of elites) are four items focused on economics. In her presidential address to the American Political Science Association (APSA), published online in the journal *Perspectives on Politics* (January 2019), [Kathleen Thelen discusses the plight of the ‘precariat’](#) in the USA from a comparative perspective, urging that analysis of democracy must include substantive notions

of a just society and cannot simply be confined to discussion of individual-level or constitutional questions, but also macrostructures of the US political economy generating this precarity (the video can be viewed [here](#)). Taking a more polemical tack, in a [forthcoming book \(October 2019\)](#) Michael Lind argues that the real challenge facing democracy is an “overclass” that has “rigged the game in its own favor”. He characterises globalisation as simply a strategy used by “the powerful managerial elite—including the people who run our governments, businesses, and the media—to undermine the working class” through damaging trade and immigration measures, amongst others. In the [Boston College Law Review \(January 2019\)](#) Eric Kades analyses the rise of dynastic wealth in the USA in the twenty-first century and ends with a warning: “We are at risk of entering a vicious cycle, in which an ever-wealthier elite use their fortunes to enact laws consolidating and extending their socioeconomic hegemony.” Beyond the USA, a [recent book on Brazil by the sociologist Ruy Braga](#) (June 2018), suggested by a DEM-DEC user, takes aim at the model of development followed in Brazil from a Marxist perspective, arguing that it has guaranteed the development of a precariat.

5 The Meaning of Populism (Again!) and Populist Tactics

Parsing the meaning of populism has become a virtually unavoidable mainstay of the DEM-DEC Research Updates since they began in August 2018 (see Theme 1-August 2018, Theme 5-September 2018, Theme 3-October 2018, Themes 1&2-November 2018, Theme 1-December 2018). In this Update, [a recent special section of the journal *Thesis Eleven*](#) (December 2018) is devoted to ‘populism(s)’. In their introduction, Alonso Casanueva Baptista and Raul Sanchez Urribarri emphasise how widely used – and widely misused – the concept has become and seek conceptual clarity not only by engaging in general definitional work and case-studies, but also by exploring the concept’s rich historical roots, previous traditions of thought, and reflecting deeply on the potential ramifications and challenges posed by populism. The introduction, and the four articles, focused on conceptual framing and Latin American case-studies, reward a close read. Elsewhere, a [recent V-Dem Policy Brief](#) discusses ‘populism and autocratization’, helpfully outlining three key paths by which populists achieve electoral success in the political-party system: (i) ‘populist adaptation’, where significant institutionalisation of established parties requires populists to mould their policies to public preferences to gain electoral advantage; (ii) ‘populist targeting’, where an emerging party rhetorically targets discrete segments of the electorate with weaker ties to existing parties in a less established political-party system; and (iii) ‘populist capture’, where the only option for populist forces is to assume control of an existing party.

6 Is Fascism a Relevant Concept?

Looking at the range of suggested additions focused on fascism (p.11 of the Update) it seems that it retains a certain allure as a governing concept for some analysts. I welcome your views on this!

(Note: For more discussion of concepts, see the [Concept Index](#) on DEM-DEC).

Suggest Additions and Subscribe to the Mailing List

You can suggest additions for the next Update by filling out the [form on DEM-DEC](#), or by emailing items directly at **democraticdecay@gmail.com**.

You can also Subscribe to the DEM-DEC mailing list to receive updates of all new additions to the Resource by using the Subscription button on the [DEM-DEC homepage](#) or by e-mailing democraticdecay@gmail.com.

Become a DEM-DEC Editor

Interested in helping with production of the Research Update? Email democraticdecay@gmail.com with a CV/resumé or use the form at the bottom of the [Get Involved](#) section. All positions are on a volunteer basis at present.

DEM-DEC Launch Podcast

Have you listened to the DEM-DEC Launch Podcast yet? The panel discussion to formally launch DEM-DEC on 22 October was broadcast by ABC Radio National's 'Big ideas' programme on 27 and 28 November and is [now available as a podcast](#). The [launch programme and details](#) are on DEM-DEC.

